



United States
of America

Congressional Record

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE 108th CONGRESS, FIRST SESSION

Thursday, June 26, 2003

House of Representatives

HON. STEVE ISRAEL
OF NEW YORK

Statement on the Medicare Prescription Drug and Modernization Act of 2003 (H.R. 1)

MR. ISRAEL: Mr. Speaker, I am proud to be a Democratic Member of this body. I have always been proud to be a Democrat. And always will be.

But I came to Congress two and a half years ago with a promise to my constituents that I would work hard to break through partisan gridlock. I promised that when I agreed with the Republicans I would vote with them; and when I disagreed I would vote against them. But that I would always work to develop consensus and move our country forward.

That is what brings me here today, Mr. Speaker.

In those two and a half years, I have focused on a health care crisis for seniors on Long Island. We used to have 12 Medicare HMOs in my communities. Now we have two left. Eighty five thousand seniors have been tossed out of their Medicare HMOs. One out of five is skipping their medication because they can't afford them.

And in those two and a half years, I have listened to Republicans blame Democrats for this crisis; Democrats blame Republicans; the House blame the Senate; the Senate blame the House; Congress blame the White House; the White House blame Congress; and everyone blame the insurance companies.

There is plenty of blame to go around. But all the blame in the world isn't going to help a single senior citizen get their prescription drugs at a more affordable price.

It's time to stop blaming. It's time to stop finger pointing. It's time for conservatives to stop railing against a \$400 billion prescription drug plan because it's too liberal. It's time for liberals to stop railing against a \$400 billion prescription drug plan because it's too conservative. It's time for everyone to stop rejecting the imperfect because we can't get the perfect. It's time to move this process forward.

Mr. Speaker, I believe the Democrats are right. It will take at least \$800 billion to provide America's seniors with a truly comprehensive, voluntary prescription drug plan.

Is an \$800 billion prescription drugs program better than a \$400 billion program that's before us today? Of course. \$400 billion is only half as good as \$800 billion...but it is \$400 billion better than nothing. And nothing is exactly what we will leave our seniors if we reject this proposal today.

To reject the largest expansion of Medicare in its 38-year history because it's \$400 billion instead of \$800 billion just doesn't make sense to me.

Mr. Speaker, only a short time ago, President Bush argued for a \$190 billion prescription drug plan. My side of the aisle proposed an \$800 billion plan. Some say we have ended up at a \$400 billion plan.

I disagree. I think we are beginning with a \$400 billion plan. It is the largest expansion of Medicare in its 38-year history. It is, in my view, a down payment. An investment.

Is this plan flawed? I believe it is. I believe the Senate plan, supported by Ted Kennedy, is much better. But we can't get near that plan unless we go to a House-Senate conference. And we can't go to a House-Senate conference unless we pass this bill today.

Yesterday at the White House, I listened carefully to President Bush. He said clearly we must move this process forward and pledged to work on a bipartisan basis to develop a final bill that represents consensus.

But there's no hope for consensus, no hope for a penny of prescription drug spending, if we slam the brakes on the process today by killing this bill today.

Mr. Speaker, of particular importance to me and the constituents I represent is that this bill contains the Greenwood-Israel-Fossella amendment, which ends the economic discrimination in federal reimbursement formulas to suburban Medicare HMOs that have forced 85,000 of my constituents out of their prescription drug plans.

Those seniors are watching us today. They are tired of blame, tired of gridlock, tired of excuses. They don't care whether it's a Democratic solution or a Republican solution, as long as it's a good solution.

This is not a perfect solution. But it is a good start. It is the largest expansion of Medicare in its 38-year history. It ends the price discrimination on Long Island and other suburbs around the nation.

Mr. Speaker, let me close by repeating this: \$400 billion is only half as good as \$800 billion...but it is \$400 billion better than nothing. And nothing is exactly what we will leave our seniors if we reject this proposal today. In the spirit of advancing the process, I will support this bill. I reserve the right, however, to vote against a bill that emerges from Conference that does not address the significant flaws in the legislation before us tonight.